

COUNTRY · HERITAGE · GARDENS · COOKERY · TRAVEL · CRAFT

LandScape

Life at nature's pace

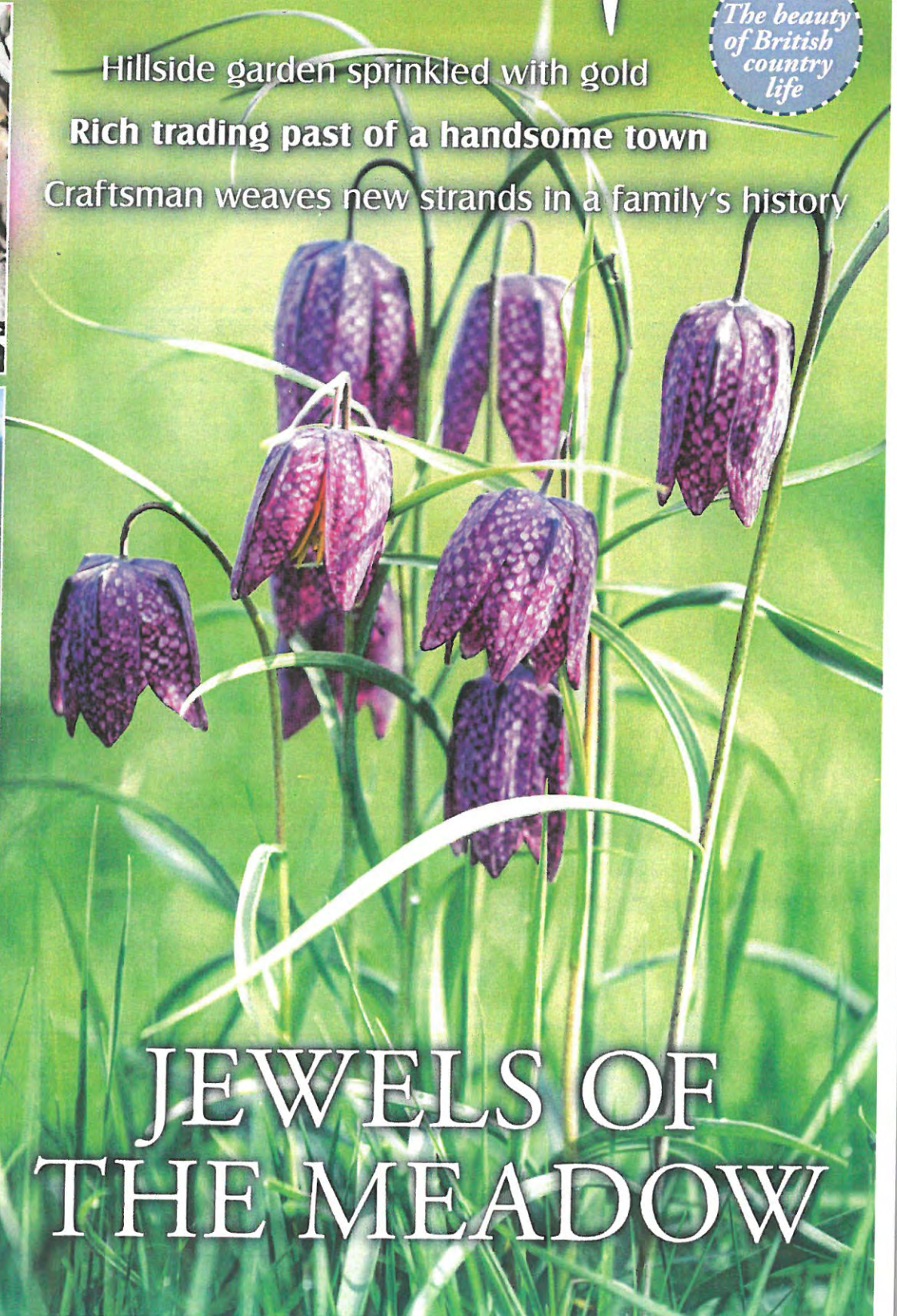
March 2024

£5.99

*The beauty
of British
country
life*



Hillside garden sprinkled with gold
Rich trading past of a handsome town
Craftsman weaves new strands in a family's history



JEWELS OF THE MEADOW

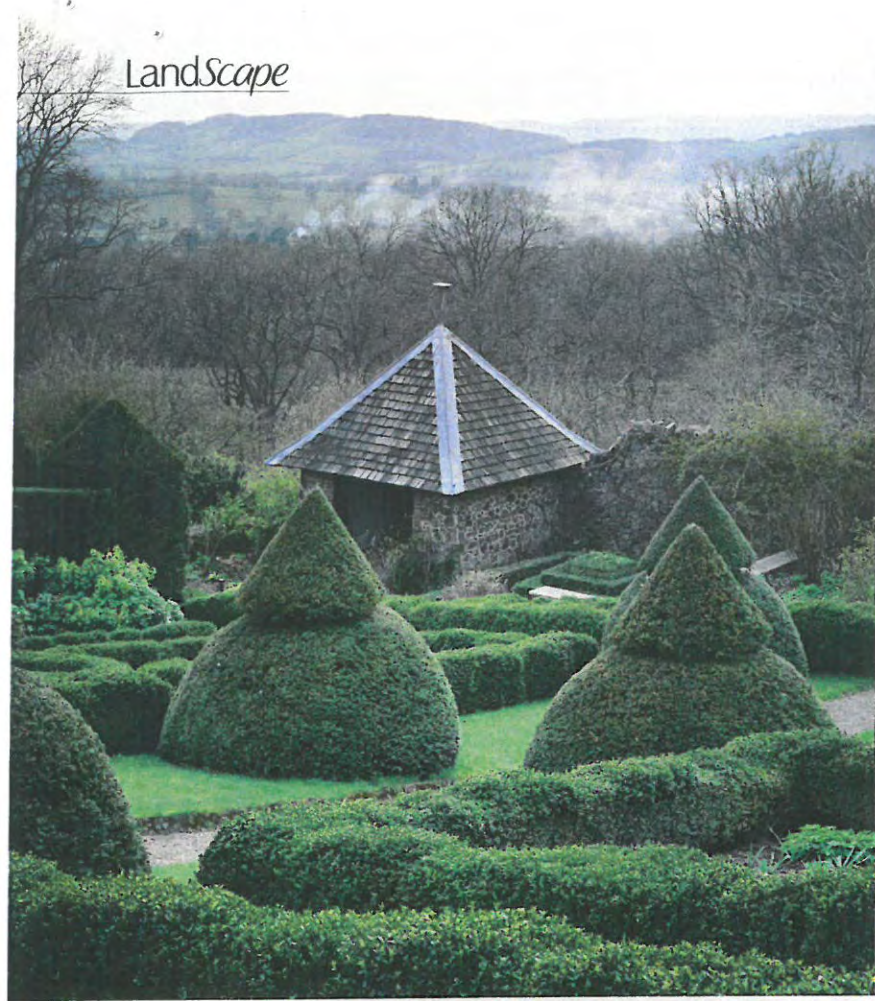
www.landscapemagazine.co.uk



On sale 24 January - 21 February

Issue 117 | March 2024 | £5.99

LandScape



Sitting on the slopes of the Malvern Hills, with far-reaching views, Perrycroft has a mix of naturalistic and formal planting, in harmony with its surroundings



HILLSIDE GARDEN LIT UP
WITH GOLDEN DANCERS

FEW HOUSES AND gardens have a more dramatic setting than Perrycroft, perched high on the western slopes of the Malvern Hills above the village of Colwall. To its south rises the ziggurat-like form of the British Camp – an iron age hill fort of spiralling earthworks – while westward is a view that stretches across the breadth of Herefordshire and into Wales on a clear day. In March, monochrome outlines are starting to fill with colour; the stems of deciduous trees begin to break out with vivid green shoots, and wild daffodils open their yellow trumpets in response to the lengthening days.

From Jubilee Drive – a road cutting along the western flank of the Malverns, constructed in 1887 to mark Queen Victoria's 50 years on the throne – a curving driveway sweeps down into Perrycroft's courtyard. Designed by renowned Arts and Crafts architect C F A Voysey in 1893 for Midlands industrialist John Wilson, the rough-textured, whitewashed house has what could be described as a large-hipped roof, with deep eaves sitting like a protective hat over the building. Leaving the sheltered courtyard to emerge on the west side of the house, its breathtaking location is revealed as views open out to the south and west, while the ridge of the Malvern Hills rises behind. The only downside of such a magnificent setting is that the house and garden face directly into the prevailing south-westerly winds.

Wild daffodils

Perrycroft, set in 10 acres of land, had been a much-loved rural retreat for the Birmingham Battalion

of the Boys' Brigade for 30 years by the time Gillian and Mark Archer bought it in 1999. They had no idea that the garden was full of wild daffodils until they removed the sheep that had been nibbling them off. Since then, the Lent lilies – so called because they flower around Easter – have spread themselves across the slopes below the house, forming a multitude of luminous, nodding flowers heralding spring.

Wild daffodils, *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, are a rare sight in the countryside today, though they still thrive around the village of Newent in Gloucestershire, approximately 10 miles south of Colwall. Their flowers have a grace rarely found in cultivated types, with pale yellow petals surrounding a darker trumpet, among narrow, grey-green leaves. Dotted through them at Perrycroft are snake's head fritillaries, *Fritillaria meleagris* – with their purple, and occasionally white, bell-shaped flowers of chequerboard petals – primroses and violets. These flowery slopes offer up a banquet for early flying bees and butterflies, such as the Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*, emerging from its winter hibernation; the male of which are an unmistakable sulphur yellow.

Welcome challenge

Perrycroft was conceived as 'a single work of art', in which every detail – no matter how small – was designed by Voysey himself, including door hinges and window catches. There are more than 80 drawings for the building at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, but only two concern the garden. One is for a section of the walled garden, while the other is a design for the summer house at the bottom of the formal garden. "Voysey wasn't a gardener, although he liked nature," says Gillian. "In his plans, the gardens are just sketched in simplistically, but his houses were designed to blend seamlessly with their surroundings. Benches set against the house take in vistas at different times of the day, and the house is fitted with vine eyes for climbers and wall shrubs, so that it can grow into its setting. We welcomed the challenge of making a garden here – one that would be in keeping with the house and its ethos."

The couple took inspiration from other gardens of the period, such as Lytes Cary in Somerset, which was a place Gillian knew well from working as Wessex regional conservator for the National Trust, while a course she took in garden restoration at the Architectural Association in the 1990s further equipped her to take on this ambitious project. >

Pure white *Fritillaria meleagris* var. *unicolor* subvar. *alba* bows its dainty bells.





From the distinctive house, with its hooded roof, wild daffodils, *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, spill down the grassy slopes at Perrycroft; their lemon petals coordinating with a spray of *Corylopsis pauciflora* branches.



A deep-pink rhododendron bush adds a column of brilliant colour above a sprinkling of pale wild daffodils, and proves a welcome contrast to the starkness of the trees beyond as spring begins to make its mark.



Once the brambles and self-seeded ash swamping the wild garden were cleared, and the overgrown yew hedges enclosing two sides of the formal garden had been cut back, Gillian and Mark began to plant. “For the first six or eight years, we planted hedges and not much else, to beef up protection from the wind,” says Gillian. “In the formal garden, we made box-edged beds each side of a central path, framed with yew topiary. Our initial idea of having a vegetable garden here failed because the soil wasn’t good enough, and it was also very difficult to work on the slope.”

Rethinking this area, Gillian took inspiration from Herterton House in Northumberland: a garden made by Frank and Marjorie Lawley, where exuberant perennial planting contrasts with a strong formal structure of evergreens. “I conceived a colour scheme starting with soft, cool colours in spring, building to warmer tones in the autumn, using mostly cottage garden plants, and particularly late summer perennials, which look good all season,” she explains. In March, the ivory forms of narcissus ‘Ice Wings’ light up the

beds inside undulating box hedges, and tiny, star-like, blue flowers of *Chionodoxa luciliae* – one of the earliest bulbs to flower in spring – pattern the ground, below the airy wands of acid-green euphorbia. The yew hedges around the formal garden are decorated by *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*-themed topiary, such as teacups and the head of the March hare – a playful touch dreamed up and clipped into being by Mark.

Natural approach

When Gillian was growing up, she was influenced by her aunt, who was a keen naturalist. “I have a love for simple plants and cottage-type flowers that are close to the native form,” she says. “I don’t really think of myself as a gardener now, but more of a naturalist, like my aunt. I have help with mowing and cutting the hedges, but I do the deadheading and weeding myself. I like to be down on my hands and knees examining what’s growing – that way I can properly see what I want to take out and what I want to leave. I think natural self-seeding really makes the nicest effects. If a

A view westwards to the hills, across the formal garden at Perrycroft, featuring pointed, clipped yews, mirroring the summer house roof, and box parterres, under March skies.



Alice in Wonderland-inspired topiary in yew can raise a smile on a cool March day in the Herefordshire garden.

"All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair—
The bees are stirring—birds are on the wing—
And Winter slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring"

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Work Without Hope'

plant fades away and leaves a gap, and the seed of another plant just blows in and germinates there and grows, that's great." Mirabel Osler's book *A Gentle Plea for Chaos* has influenced the evolution of Gillian's gardening philosophy. "More and more, I just step back and see what happens. I feel you've got to let go and see what the garden does," she says.

Over time, Gillian has changed her approach to plant selection too. "In the past, I didn't like the idea of having exotic plants in the garden, but I've come to really appreciate rhododendrons and think that, in the right setting, they can be magnificent. And they like it here too, which is an important consideration. I've recently planted some with pink flowers in varying tones to lighten a dark area in spring. I also like dogwoods because their bracts give a flash of white." Plants in the bog garden, such as skunk cabbage, *Lysichiton americanus*, with its shiny yellow spathes, would not be planted today, as it is classed as an invasive species, although if gardeners remove the spadix after flowering, there is little chance of it >



Dazzling spears of western skunk cabbage, *Lysichiton americanus*, punctuate the bog garden.



A pergola shelters a path framed by clipped box spheres leading to a gated archway (top). Box globes among *Euphorbia characias wulfenii* and self-seeding plants, such as grape hyacinths (above).

spreading into local watercourses. “They were already here and doing well, so we’ve left them. I’m going to use what’s here and embellish it,” explains Gillian.

The beautiful, but labour-intensive, tulips and dahlias that Gillian used to use in the garden are gone now in favour of long-term planting and self-seeding – an approach which does not damage soil structure: “In a way, we’re applying no-dig principles to our ornamental areas,” she says. “Everything breathes a sigh of relief if you’re not poking at it all the time, planting bulbs and lifting tubers. The soil structure is preserved if it’s not constantly disturbed. We mulch the soil with a thick layer of well-rotted manure or garden compost in autumn and sometimes in the spring too.”

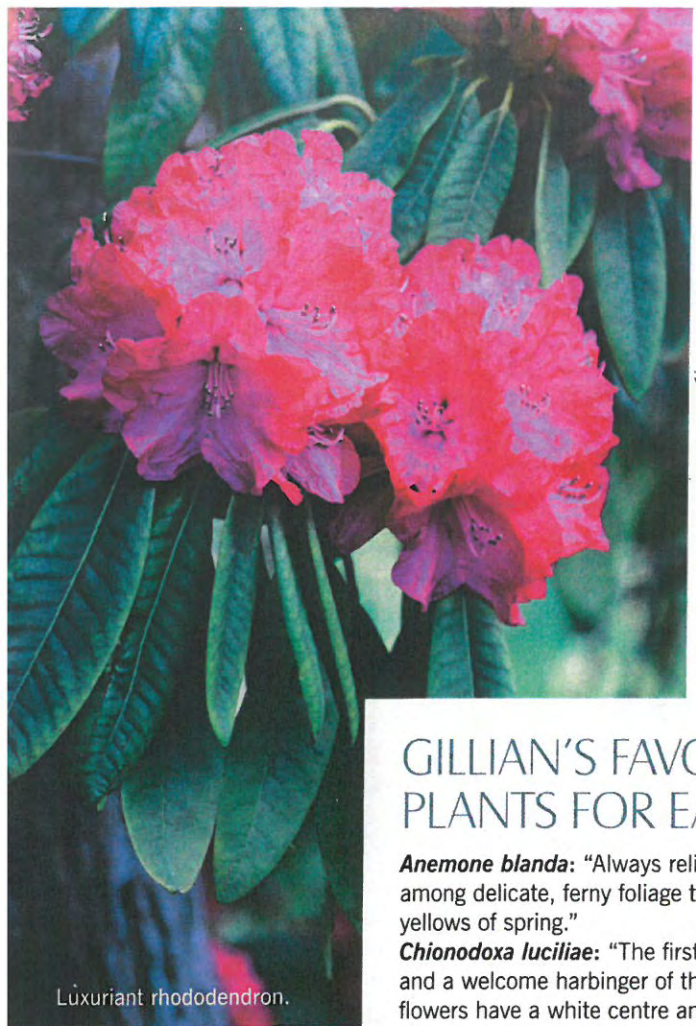
While tulips may be out of favour, narcissi are definitely in because they come up year after year. “White daffodils, such as ‘Thalia’ and ‘Ice Wings’, look beautiful with the new lime green growth of box in spring,” says Gillian.

“I also like the pink ones, such as narcissus ‘Katie Heath’, which has a salmon cup. I don’t use yellow daffodils in the borders because there are so many in the natural areas of the garden.” Other favourites are jonquils, which are multi-headed narcissi, with small, scented flowers, such as ‘Geranium’, which has rounded, white petals and fiery orange trumpets.

At the end of the path slicing downhill through the middle of the formal garden between pointy-hatted yews, a brick and timber pergola frames an arched opening in the garden’s boundary wall. Below it, mounds of clipped box are lapped by the furry, silvery leaves of stachys and deep-blue flowers of muscari and scilla. Further down the slope is Voysey’s summer house, with its distinctive pyramidal roof and tall finial. Wooden benches in the garden were designed by Gillian herself, inspired by Voysey’s aesthetic; some with decorative finials, and others with sides which Gillian describes as “a bit like a fireside chair in a pub, giving a sense of cosiness”.

Native plants

Below the formal areas to the west of the house, the garden becomes wilder. Here, grassy walks, dotted with flowers, thread themselves between mature trees and shrubs, past ponds and thickets. William Robinson’s book *The Wild Garden*, published in 1870, became an enormous influence on the owners of small country estates, such as Perrycroft. He encouraged a move towards a more natural style of gardening, away from the Victorian technique of bedding out regimented lines of plants raised in greenhouses. Along with the designer Gertrude Jekyll, he popularised the herbaceous border; the use of shrubs in natural settings; and an appreciation of native plants – all things we tend to take for granted as mainstays of gardening these days. >



Luxuriant rhododendron.



Ebullient *Chionodoxa luciliae*.

GILLIAN'S FAVOURITE PLANTS FOR EARLY SPRING

***Anemone blanda*:** "Always reliable, a lovely purple flower among delicate, ferny foliage that contrasts nicely with the yellows of spring."

***Chionodoxa luciliae*:** "The first bulb to emerge in spring and a welcome harbinger of things to come." Its blue flowers have a white centre and yellow stamens.

Narcissus 'Pipit': A jonquil-type daffodil producing masses of beautiful lemon-yellow flowers with a wonderful scent. It naturalises well.

***Rhododendron barbatum*:** "Produces exotic red blossoms in an otherwise quiet woodland setting; a wonderful splash of colour."

***Scilla siberica*:** "The brightest blue, star-shaped flowers nestling among the primroses: a perfect combination."

Elegant *Anemone blanda*.

Narcissus 'Pipit' shine.



Since Gillian and Mark discovered the swathes of wild daffodils on the grassy slopes below the house, the couple have managed the grass to encourage their spread and that of other native wild flowers, such as purple-flowered betony, *Stachys officinalis*; thistle-like knapweeds, *Centaurea nigra*; and various orchids. "We never cut the meadow grass until the end of June, and the areas with only daffodils are cut first," says Gillian. "Where other flowers follow on, it can be difficult to judge when to cut because different plants need different timings. If the meadows are cut late, we risk mowing off the devil's bit scabious which flowers in August and September, and some areas we leave so that there are seeds for birds – goldfinches seem to love the knapweed seedheads." Areas rich in common spotted orchids, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, which flower in June and seed themselves around at the end of summer, are not cut until early autumn. All the grass is then given a tight cut in the winter months, ready for spring.

For Gillian, early spring is a time of clarity and anticipation. "After all the dead herbaceous stems have been cut, the structure of the garden is much clearer, and the box and yew topiary stand out brilliantly," she says. "The garden never stands still, and shoots are already emerging, especially red and green euphorbia and the lime-green spikes of hemerocallis in the borders, which contrast beautifully with the early

"A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze"

William Wordsworth, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud'

blossoms of *Anemone blanda* and *Chionodoxa luciliae*. In the wild garden, under the fading witch hazels and the early rhododendrons, is a wonderful carpet of primroses, violets and wood anemones."

Perrycroft's architect and designer, C F A Voysey, wrote: "Never look at an ugly thing twice", and there is certainly no danger of doing so in this beauty of a garden, where finding anything less than perfect to look at even once is virtually impossible. ■

• Words: Carole Drake • Photography: GAP Photos/Carole Drake

CONTACT

Perrycroft is located in Upper Colwall, near Malvern in Herefordshire. For information on group visits and open days, please see the website at www.perrycroft.co.uk For details of holiday cottages within Perrycroft's grounds, visit www.perrycroftholidaycottages.co.uk



A weathered wooden bench provides a place from which to admire the cascading blooms from the bottom of a slope.

Photography: Alamy; iBulb